

# Psalm 119— Logotechnical Analysis

## Guidelines

- Please read the [General Introduction](#) as well as the Introduction to [Book I](#) and [Book V](#).
- For common features found in the numerical analysis charts, see the [Key to the charts](#).

## Specific features of Psalm 119

- This alphabetic acrostic is the longest psalm: 176 verselines and 1063 words (MT1064). Together with Psalm 118, it functions in Book V as a bridge between two well-defined cycles, the First Group of Eleven Psalms (107-117) and the Songs of Ascents (120-134). This unique psalm can be described as a many-coloured mosaic of statements and thoughts dealing with YHWH's commandments and precepts. This makes it extremely difficult to grasp its compositional structure in terms of verbal content. The macro framework of the poem as a whole shows no evident structure, but it may have a menorah structure as I shall show below. As for its micro structure, that of the 22 8-line cantos, scholars found 3 strophes of 3+3+2, 3+2+3, or 2+3+3 verselines, or 4 strophes of 2 verselines. The number of strophes varies from 44 (Christensen) to no less than 85 (Fokkelman), which demonstrates the uncertainty regarding the division of the cantos into smaller units. However, in his major work on the compositional structure of the Psalms Pieter van der Lugt shows convincingly, in my opinion, that the cantos have 2 regular 4-line canticles each: 2+2 + 2+2.

### Strophic structure - Canto/Stanza boundary: || Sub-canto boundary: |

- Van der Lugt divides the 22 cantos into three parts with 2 + 10 + 10 cantos respectively, forming 7 sections in the pattern 2 || 4 4 2 || 4 4 2 as follows:

2 [I-II] vv. 1-16 || 4 [III-VI] vv. 17-48 | 4 [VII-X] vv. 49-80 | 2 [XI-XII] vv. 81-96 ||  
4 [XIII-XVI] vv. 97-128 | 4 [XVII-XX] vv. 129-160 | 2 [XXI-XXII] vv. 161-176.

The 176 verselines are all bicola and the 22 cantos have 44 2+2-line canticles.

- Fokkelman finds 85 strophes, grouped into 19 “octets/stanzas of four S-strophes, 2 L-strophes and 1 S-strophe in Aleph, Zayin and Lamed.” The 176 verselines are all bicolic, except vs. 48, 145 and 176, which he takes as tricola. He divides the first octet into vs. 1-3, 4-5 and 6-8 (pattern 3 + 2 + 3), but the rest of the text into pairs of two verselines. However, this pattern is interrupted by four strophes with 3 verselines: first, vs. 49-51 and 52-54, and second, vs. 89-91 and 94-96. Because of the three tricola, the 176 verselines have 355 cola (352 + 3).
- Labuschagne: I divide the 22 cantos into 7 units outlined in a menorah pattern, which I call *cantica*. Moreover, I locate the divergent 32-verseline canticum at the centre. The pattern is: 24 || 24 || 24 || 32 || 24 || 24 || 24, or 3x8 || 3x8 || 3x8 || 4x8 || 3x8 || 3x8 || 3x8. The 176 Masoretic verses divide into:  
1-8, 9-16, 17-24 || 25-32, 33-40, 41-48 || 49-56, 57-64, 65-72 || 73-80, 81-88, 89-96, 97-104 || 105-112, 113-120, 121-128 || 129-136, 137-144, 145-152 || 153-160, 161-168, 169-176.
- Christensen ([www.bibal.net](http://www.bibal.net)) discerns a regular structure of the 22 alphabetic units (cantos) and finds 44 strophes of 4 verselines each. The 22 cantos are outlined in a ‘nested’ menorah pattern, a menorah within a menorah within a menorah, as follows:  
1-8, 9-16, 17-24 {25-32, 33-40, 41-48 [49-56, 57-64, 65-72 (73-80, 81-88, 89-96, 97-104) 105-112, 113-120, 121-128] 129-136, 137-144, 145-152} 153-160, 161-168, 169-176.

Additionally, on prosodic grounds, he detects a larger sevenfold structure, which is supposed to overlie his presumed ‘nested’ menorah structures. It consists of 7 cantica outlined in a menorah pattern, which is similar to the menorah I propose. The 176 Masoretic verses divide into: 1-24, 25-48, 49-72, 73-104, 105-128, 129-152, 153-176.

## Logotechnical analysis

- Columns **a** and **b** show the number of words before and after the atnach.

			Total	a	b	
First Half 1-88	Canto 1	Total, 119:1-8	א	48 = 32	+ 16	533 words
	Canto 2	Total, 119:9-16	ב	45 = 28	+ 17	
	Canto 3	Total, 119:17-24	ג	50 = 32	+ 18	
	<b>Canticum I</b>	<b>Total, 119: 1-24</b>		<b>143 = 92</b>	<b>+ 51</b>	
	Canto 4	Total, 119:25-32	ד	42 = 26	+ 16	
	Canto 5	Total, 119:33-40	ה	48 = 36	+ 12	
	Canto 6	Total, 119:41-48	ו	49 = 38	+ 11	
	<b>Canticum II</b>	<b>Total, 119:25-48</b>		<b>139 = 100</b>	<b>+ 39</b>	
	Canto 7	Total, 119:49-56	ז	47 = 31	+ 16	
Four Middle Cantos 10-13	Canto 8	Total, 119:57-64	ח	49 = 33	+ 16	530 words
	Canto 9	Total, 119:65-72	ט	54 = 32	+ 22	
	<b>Canticum III</b>	<b>Total, 119:49-72</b>		<b>150 = 96</b>	<b>+ 54</b>	
	Canto 10	Total, 119:73-80	י	51 = 30	+ 21	
	Canto 11	Total, 119:81-88	יא	50 = 25	+ 25	
	Canto 12	Total, 119:89-96	יב	49 = 26	+ 23	
	Canto 13	Total, 119: 97-104	יג	54 = 27	+ 27	
	<b>Canticum IV</b>	<b>Total, 119:73-104</b>		<b>204 = 108</b>	<b>+ 96</b>	
	Canto 14	Total, 119:105-112	יד	49 = 29	+ 20	
Second Half 89-176	Canto 15	Total, 119:119-120	טו	46 = 25	+ 21	530 words
	Canto 16	Total, 119:121-128	טז	48 = 30	+ 18	
	<b>Canticum V</b>	<b>Total, 119:105-128</b>		<b>143 = 84</b>	<b>+ 59</b>	
	Canto 17	Total, 119:129-136	יז	50 = 26	+ 24	
	Canto 18	Total, 119:137-144	יח	42 = 27	+ 15	
	Canto 19	Total, 119:145-152	יט	44 = 27	+ 17	
	<b>Canticum VI</b>	<b>Total, 119:129-152</b>		<b>136 = 80</b>	<b>+ 56</b>	
	Canto 20	Total, 119:153-160	כ	51 = 25	+ 26	
	Canto 21	Total, 119:161-168	כא	48 = 26	+ 22	
Canto 22	Total, 119:169-176	כב	49 = 29	+ 20		
<b>Canticum VII</b>	<b>Total, 119:153-176</b>		<b>148 = 80</b>	<b>+ 68</b>		
Grand Total, 119:1-176*				1063 = 640	+ 423	

\* In MT the words כָּל־פְּקוּדֵי כָּל in v. 128a obviously contain a scribal error and should be read כָּל־פְּקוּדֵיָהּ. The effect of the emendation is that the psalm has 1063 instead of 1064 words (MT).

## Observations

1. In terms of verselines, the arithmetic middle of the psalm falls between the verseline with initial *kaph* (v. 88) and the verseline with initial *lamedh* (v. 89): vs. 1-88 || vs. 89-176. In terms of the 1063 words, the text divides into 533 | 530, which means that the last 3 words of v. 88b constitute the mathematical centre of the psalm ( $1063 = 530 + 3 + 530$ ).<sup>1</sup>

The pivotal words express in a nutshell what the psalm is all about. No wonder that it echoes in various phrasings and fashions throughout the entire psalm.

וְאֶשְׁמְרָה עֵדוּת פִּיךָ

And I will keep the testimonies of your mouth.

If the author had planned a larger meaningful centre in terms of the 22 cantos, the middle 4 cantos with initial **י, כ, ל, מ**, would be the most possible choice (Cantos 10-13), vs. 73-104. As I shall demonstrate below, this particular passage, *Canticum IV* stands out with 4 instead of 3 cantos and 32 instead of 24 verselines constituting the centre of a distinct menorah. The fact that, relatively speaking, this centre is extremely large, does not pose a problem, because in this psalm everything is large-scale.

2. Let us now consider the compositional structure of the psalm in search of the overall framework that orders its 22 alphabetic cantos. Since there is little consensus among scholars about the poem's structure in terms of content, in my judgement, the only approach that will open new perspectives, is to focus primarily on the formal aspects of the text, more specifically on the numerical factors.

In the case of Psalm 119, with its strict organisation of the text in a carefully composed numerically determined eightfold alphabetic acrostic, such a formal approach is most appropriate. In the third volume of his *Cantos and Strophes in Biblical Hebrew Poetry. Psalms 90-150*, Pieter van der Lugt offers a new proposal for its compositional structure. According to him, the 22 cantos have a regular verseline structure:  $8 = 2+2 + 2+2$  each. As for the macro canto-structure, he regards Cantos I-II (1-16) as an introduction and divides the rest of the text into two main sections having the following regular pattern:

4: III-VI vv. 17-48 | 4: VII-X vv. 49-80 | 2: XI-XII vv. 81-96 ||

4: XIII-XVI vv. 97-128 | 4: XVII-XX vv. 129-160 | 2: XXI-XXII vv. 161-176.

Though I find Van der Lugt's division of the text in itself convincing, I venture to offer an alternative based on a menorah pattern in terms of the 22 cantos:  $3+3+3+4+3+3+3$ . These canto clusters I call *cantica* in line with Duane Christensen's terminology.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> There is an exact parallel in Qohelet of which the centre falls between 6:9 and 6:10, at the end of the 111<sup>th</sup> verseline. In terms of verses the book divides into 111 || 111 and in terms of words, it divides into 1496 || 1491, which means that the last 5 words of the first 111 verses, 6:9b, constitute the mathematical centre of the book ( $2987 = 1491 + 5 + 1491$ ): נִסְיָהּ הַבֵּל וְרַעוּת רִוּחַ. See my article "Compositional Structure of the Book of Ecclesiastes", <http://www.labuschagne.nl/psalms.htm>.

Another example of the same construction is to be found in the 15 Songs of Ascents (120-134), where 127 constitutes the centre ( $15 = 7 + 1 + 7$ ) with 127:4 as the middle verse ( $101 = 50 + 1 + 50$ ) and the last 2 words of 127:3b as the middle words ( $810 = 404 + 2 + 404$ ): פִּרְי הַבֶּטֶן. See *Psalm 127*.

A third example is Third Isaiah (56-66), where the meaningful centre of Isaiah 61 (positioned at the centre of the 11 chapters), is the last 9 words of 61:6, which are also the last words of the 96<sup>th</sup> verse ( $192 = 96 + 96$ ). See "Numerical Features of Third Isaiah", <http://www.labuschagne.nl/psalms.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> The Italian word 'canto', which is derived from Latin *cantus*, 'song', is defined as 'a chief division of a long poem'. Dante's *Divina Commedia*, e.g., is divided into 34 cantos, and Byron's *Don Juan* into 17 (cf. A.F. Scott, *Current Literary terms: A Concise Dictionary*, MacMillan Press, 1979). In fact, 'canto' is also derived from Latin: *canticulum*, which means 'little canto'. In this case, the Latin term *canticum* is most appropriate for describing the 7 main sections of Psalm 119. Interesting to note is that in Roman plays, the *Cantica* were sung or recited to musical accompaniment.

The central canticum stands out with its **4** cantos, **32** verselines and **204** (12x17) words, and is flanked by 3+3+3 cantos of **24** verselines each on either side:  $9 + 4 + 9 = 22$  cantos and  $72 + 32 + 72 = 176$  verselines.

Canticum I	vs. 1-24	3 cantos	<b>24</b> verselines	143 words
Canticum II	vs. 25-48	3 cantos	<b>24</b> verselines	139 words +
Canticum III	vs. 49-72	3 cantos	<b>24</b> verselines	150 words = <b>289</b> (17x17)
<b>Canticum IV</b>	<b>vs. 73-104</b>	<b>4 cantos</b>	<b>32 verselines</b>	<b>204 words</b> (12 x 17)
Canticum V	vs. 105-128	3 cantos	<b>24</b> verselines	143 words
Canticum VI	vs. 129-152	3 cantos	<b>24</b> verselines	<b>136</b> (8 x 17) words
Canticum VII	vs. 153-176	3 cantos	<b>24</b> verselines	148 words.

The pivotal position of **Canticum IV** with its **32** verselines and **204** words, is emphasized by the fact that it is embraced by **104** (4 x **26**) verselines:  $72 + 32 = 104 = 32 + 72$ . All this may be adduced as evidence corroborating my suggestion to regard Canticum IV as the larger meaningful centre of the poem. The centre comprises the middle cantos with initial ו, כ, ל, מ, which in the reverse order spell the word מלכי, 'my king'. Compare Observation 2 in my Analysis of [Psalm 145](#)! For another example of a hidden acrostic, see Special Feature 4 in my Analysis of [Psalm 9-10](#).

3. Christensen found a similar menorah, outlined in **7** units, which he calls *cantica* to indicate the sections of the poem larger than the canto. His menorah is determined "primarily on prosodic grounds in terms of the inverse concentric arrangement in the distribution of SAS (syntactic accentual-stress) units":

A	Wisdom teaching: the way of <i>Torah</i> is the preferred way	Canticum 1	119:1–24
B	Expressing his lament, the psalmist says: "Keep me alive"	Canticum 2	119:25–48
C	Prayers to YHWH as master teacher; intensifies interiority	Canticum 3	119:49–72
X	<b>Privilege of servitude—God's will as moral obedience</b>	Canticum 4	119:73–104
C'	Prayer as "free-will offering" and fidelity in life or in death	Canticum 5	119:105–128
B'	Trust in God's nearness as our defence attorney (savior)	Canticum 6	119:129–152
A'	With the agony of torment unabated there is hope	Canticum 7	119:153–176

In addition to this perfect and simple menorah, with which I fully concur, Christensen presents - as he does with many other psalms - a much more detailed chiastic pattern which he calls a 'nested' menorah - a menorah within a menorah within a menorah. This arrangement appears to me to be so complicated that I cannot imagine it being correct, or even intended by the author.

4. Seeing the curious pattern of the **22** cantos with their **8**-verselines, the question arises why the author did not use the number of fullness, **7**, to compose his alphabetic acrostic as **22 septets**. Compare the structure of the Book of [Lamentations](#), which has **154** Masoretic verses (**7** x **22**). We can of course speculate about the reason behind his choice for the number **8**, e.g., that it is the number of 'overcompleteness' (**7** + 1), but there are better explanations, which are both simple and, in my opinion, decisive.

First, the use of the number **8** may have been intended as another way of weaving the divine name into the text, for **8** represents the name YHWH as the sum of the digits of **17** and **26**:  $1+7=8$ ;  $2+6=8$ .

Another explanation is that its use may have everything to do with the **8** synonyms used in the psalm to indicate YHWH's **Torah**, the embodiment of all his commands and instructions. The synonyms appear throughout the psalm in random order, depending on the context.

Here they are, in alphabetic order:

אמרה	saying utterance promise
דבר	word
חק	statute prescription rule
מצוה	commandment
משפט	ordinance decision judgement
עדות	stipulation testimony provision obligation
פקודים	precepts instructions
תורה	direction instruction law.

In almost every single verse, right through the **176 (8 x 22)** verselines of the psalm, one of these eight synonyms occurs (only one per verse). The exceptions are: first, v. 3, where we find **בְּדַרְכָּיו**, ‘by his ways’, second, v. 90, where we read **אֱמוּנָתְךָ**, ‘your faithfulness’, and third, v. 122, which lacks any of the synonyms.

In a fourth case, **v. 37**, the words **בְּדַרְכְּךָ תִּיַיִן**, ‘give me life in your way’, are suspect. The Targum and some Hebrew manuscripts (probably correctly) read **בְּדַבְּרְךָ**, ‘by your word’. See *BHS* and compare vs. 25 and 107 for the expression **תִּיַיִן בְּדַבְּרְךָ**, ‘give me life according to your word’.

However, there is more to it, if we consider the spread of the synonyms. In six cantos all 8 synonyms occur in all 8 successive verselines: Canto 5 (vs. 33-40), Canto 6 (vs. 41-48), Canto 8 (vs. 57-64), Canto 10 (vs. 73-80), Canto 11 (vs. 81-88) and Canto 17 (vs. 129-136). In the remaining 16 cantos, **7** synonyms are present, due to the double occurrence of one of them, obviously to achieve **7** occurrences (the number of fullness). There are only two exceptions: Canto 1 (vs. 1-8) has **6** synonyms, and so has Canto 12 (vs. 89-96), where we find **אֱמוּנָתְךָ**, ‘your faithfulness’, instead of one of the 8 synonyms.

5. Having made a word-count of groupings of 22 verselines (1-22, 23-44, 45-66, etc.), in order to see whether there were significant numbers in the 8 groups, I found the following:

vs. 1-22 (22 verselines)	<b>130 (5 x 26) words</b>
vs. 23-44	129 words
vs. 45-66	132 words
vs. 67-88	142 words
vs. 89-110	139 words
vs. 111-132	130 words
vs. 133-154	125 words
vs. 155-176 (22 verselines)	<b>136 (8 x 17) words.</b>

It appears that the psalm is opened and closed by the first and last group of **22** verselines, with respectively **130** and **136** words. This may not simply be a matter of coincidence but consciously designed.

6. I have refrained from registering all occurrences of divine name numbers and their multiples, but the following instances catch the eye immediately:

Vs. 1-24	<b>51 (3 x 17) words</b> after atnach
vs. 4-6	<b>17 words</b> in total
vs. 9-16	<b>17 words</b> after atnach
vs. 1-22	<b>130 (5 x 26) words</b> in total
vs. 25-32	<b>26 words</b> before atnach
vs. 41-44	<b>26 words</b> in total
vs. 25-72	<b>289 (17 x 17) Cantica II + III</b>
vs. 77-80	<b>26 words</b> in total, <b>15</b> before and <b>11</b> after atnach

vs. 73-80      **51** (3 x **17**) words in total  
 vs. 93-96      **26** words in total, **15** before and **11** after atnach  
 vs. 89-96      **26** words before atnach  
 vs. 97-100     **26** words in total, **11** before and **15** after atnach  
 vs. 109-112    **26** words in total  
 vs. 121-123    **17** words in total  
 vs. 129-131    **17** words in total  
 vs. 129-136    **26** words before atnach  
 vs. 145-152    **17** words after atnach  
 vs. 129-152    **136** (8 x **17**) words in total  
 vs. 153-160    **51** (3 x **17**) words in total, with **26** after atnach  
 vs. 155-176    **136** (8 x **17**)  
 vs. 161-168    **26** words before atnach  
 vs. 169-171    **17** words in total  
 vs. 153-176    **68** (4 x **17**) words after atnach

7. The name יהוה occurs **24** times, which may have been deliberately chosen to highlight the six **24**-verseline cantica. As in Psalm 118, the number of occurrences of the divine name has a highlighting function. For Psalm 118 see Observation 7 in my Analysis of [Psalm 118](#). There, the **24** occurrences of יהוה subtly highlight the major structuring number **24**. The divine name appears altogether **52** (2 x **26**) times in Psalms 118-119.

© 2012  
 Dr. C.J. Labuschagne      Senior Lecturer in Semitic Languages (retired),  
    Brinkhorst 44      University of Pretoria, South Africa  
 9751 AT Haren (Gron)      and  
    The Netherlands      Professor of Old Testament (retired),  
[labuschagne.cj@gmail.com](mailto:labuschagne.cj@gmail.com)      University of Groningen, The Netherlands